

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
Washington, DC 20515-2201

May 5, 2021

The Honorable Denis McDonough  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
1722 I Street NW  
Washington D.C., 20421

Secretary McDonough:

We are writing on behalf of over 125 veterans who have contacted our offices regarding problems using the newly implemented online Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System (BTSSS).

As you know, the Beneficiary Travel program allows eligible veterans and caregivers to receive travel pay to cover out-of-pocket costs for mileage and other travel expenses when they travel for an approved U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) appointment. We understand the VA has recently implemented a new system, BTSSS, that allows veterans to submit claims using an online portal.

While we applaud the VA for working to modernize its systems, we are hearing negative feedback from veterans and local veterans' service organizations (VSOs) that this system is not accessible or usable for many veterans. Specifically, veterans who are older and not adept at using a computer, cognitively impaired (including those who experienced traumatic brain injuries), or who do not have reliable access to the Internet or internet-enabled devices, have difficulty accessing the system.

Over 125 veterans have contacted our offices in the last three months to seek our assistance because they have been unable to file for their travel benefits claims or are frustrated with the new system. Conversations with local VSOs reveal our offices are not alone. Area VSOs say they have received more than 100 phone calls about this issue in just the last month. While we appreciate the online portal has the potential to make it easier to submit claims and speed up payments, new technology is not helpful if users cannot, or do not know how to, navigate it.

We have heard from veterans and stakeholders that the complexity in establishing a BTSSS account is overwhelming. Many veterans who are seeking reimbursement are older adults who do not have strong internet literacy skills or even have access to a smartphone or computer. Additionally, concerned stakeholders have said some veterans, including those who are older, or have disabilities such as combat-connected traumatic brain injuries, do not have the ability to remember specific personal information that is required to finalize the authentication process for a BTSSS online account. While the VA, VSOs, or trusted family members can assist veterans in using the computer, only the veteran can answer the personal questions required before authentication can take place.

We recognize that this system is new, and it takes time for people to adapt to new technologies. However, we have heard reports that, as of March 2021, the utilization of the online claim reimbursement system is very low among veterans, with only 12% of claims being submitted through the new system.

We are concerned that alternate options for veterans submitting for reimbursement are inadequate. Veterans can submit paper forms, but the new BTSSS process requires more department approvals than the previous system. This ultimately delays payments. For example, prior to switching to BTSSS, the Saginaw VA's two designated travel clerks could each process over 250 claims per day. Under the BTSSS system, the two clerks are now only able to each process 50-80 per day. At this time, there is a backlog of approximately 1,400 claims at the Saginaw VA. The Saginaw VA has assigned additional staff to help overcome these challenges, which we commend; however, this is not a sustainable solution. The VA must take system wide action to streamline this new process.

It is also important to note that many people, including veterans, have delayed elective medical care because of the coronavirus pandemic. With vaccine distribution efforts ramping up, many veterans are expected to seek delayed medical care. It is critical that the BTSSS system is operating smoothly and solutions to address the backlog are implemented before this influx occurs.

In order to assess the current state of the system, we ask that you answer the following questions:

1. What informational resources has the VA provided to help veterans and VSOs navigate the new online BTSSS system? How are these resources being shared and publicly communicated to veterans without online access?
2. What specific support is being offered to veterans who struggle to complete the online authentication process for the BTSSS?
3. We understand the kiosks are no longer in use because they are not interoperable with the online BTSSS system. However, we have heard from veterans that they appreciate the convenience and ease of the kiosks. If the kiosks are no longer available, what technologies are being offered in their place? Can you explain why the kiosks were not made interoperable with the BTSSS system?
4. Is the VA making available an adequate number of laptops or other internet-enabled devices to ensure adequate access to BTSSS? Is the VA working to ensure there is an adequate number of staff assigned to assist veterans who need technology support? What resources will be available for veterans who do not have reliable access to technology or the Internet to help ensure they can still access the BTSSS system?
5. How long, on average, does it take for veterans who submit travel benefits claims through the BTSSS system to receive payment? How long, on average, does it take for users who manually submit paper travel benefit claims to receive payments?

6. How large is the current travel pay backlog? Is the VA providing facilities with guidance and best practices on how to address this backlog and ensure timely reimbursement?
7. When can we expect a solution addressing the concerns we have heard from veterans, VA staff and stakeholders about the implementation of the BTSSS system?

Thank you for your attention to this issue. It is critical that veterans are able to easily access the benefits they have earned.

Sincerely,



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Daniel T. Kildee  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS



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Debbie Stabenow  
U.S. SENATOR



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Gary Peters  
U.S. SENATOR



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John Moolenaar  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS